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ABSTRACT

Schools cannot approach the problem of street gangs with the same strategies as law enforcement agencies, but rather must create a nurturing environment for all students, where success in school and life becomes the only attractive option for gang members. Street gangs represent the racial, cultural, and economic diversity of American society. Gangs are similar to other organizations in that they have a name, claim territory, have a continuous membership, and distinguish themselves from other groups. However, to qualify as a gang, the organization must be involved in criminal activity. Gang involvement can range from simple admiration or identification with someone who is in a gang to classification by a law enforcement agency as a documented full-participant. The following factors contribute to gang involvement: (1) power; (2) pride; (3) prestige; (4) peer pressure; (5) adventure; (6) self-preservation; (7) money; and (8) limited life options. Schools must avoid the unproductive approach of attempting to identify and discipline gang members based on stereotyped behaviors. A positive educational approach to preventing gang involvement should include the following components: (1) staff development; (2) values education; (3) school climate; (4) cultural inclusion; and (5) community involvement. A list of 24 references is appended. (FMW)

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Street Gangs and the Schools: A Blueprint for Intervention

Kevin W. Riley

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Street Gangs and the Schools: A Blueprint for Intervention

by
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Introduction

Sometime within the next week – no matter where you live – you will likely read about, hear about, see on the evening TV news, or even personally witness some violent criminal act attributable to street gangs. Drive-by shootings, rape, assault, extortion, vandalism, drug abuse, arson, narcotics trafficking – these are the violent hallmarks of the gangs now operating in many of our nation's urban centers.

The street gang phenomenon is no longer confined to the great metro giants of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. Local law enforcement agencies and the FBI now monitor heavy gang activity in Denver, Milwaukee, Omaha, Oklahoma City, Kansas City, and many other cities. The Los Angeles gang called the Crips have expanded their crack empire beyond that city to gangs in San Francisco, Seattle, Miami, Boston, and San Diego. With this rise in street gang activity, there is a corresponding rise in drug trafficking, violence, and homicides.

Consider these developments:

- In 1989, as the number of Denver gang members recruited from Los Angeles soared, so did the homicide rate.
- In Milwaukee, out-of-town recruits from Chicago and Los Angeles have caused gang membership to soar. According to local authorities, each of Milwaukee's gangs specializes in specific crimes, for example, auto theft, burglary, or drug trafficking.

- In San Francisco after the gang called Out of Control emerged in 1987, homicides rose dramatically until rival gangs signed a peace treaty. But by the summer of 1990, killings were on the rise again.
- In Miami local authorities report that more than 64 gang factions have emerged with a total membership of nearly 4,000. These gangs cannot compete in the sophisticated Miami drug market, so they revel in violence for its own sake.
- In Shreveport a dramatic increase in homicides since 1987 has been attributed to the steady infiltration by the Crips and Pirus gangs from Los Angeles.
- In Seattle gangs emerged slowly. The first drive-by shooting did not take place until 1989, and then there was nearly one a day!
- In Boston fanatical gang activity centers on turf battles, drug sales, and street crime.
- In Omaha law enforcement agencies report the influence of Los Angeles' Crips and Pirus gangs, as well as Chicago's Black Gangster Disciples. The market demand for crack has driven up the price to nearly 10 times the amount paid in Los Angeles.
- In San Diego the number of documented gang members has now swelled to more than 3,000, representing at least 35 different factions. Because of this city's proximity to Los Angeles and the Mexican border, the crack trade flourishes and, along with it, an alarming number of drive-by shootings and homicides.

These street gangs exact an immense toll through the loss of innocent lives, the imprisonment of gang members, the destruction of property, and the commitment of tax dollars to waging a seemingly unwinnable war. Crime statistics released on New Year's Day 1990 indicated that the national homicide rate increased by 5% from 1988 to 1989. Criminologists and law enforcement officials agree overwhelmingly that the major cause is turf wars over the crack market. In 1989, 20,680 Americans were slain – one every 25

minutes – a figure also attributable to the rise in street gangs and drug trafficking.

But these data represent just one aspect of street gang activity, primarily that of African-American street gangs. In reality, the gang phenomenon transcends cultural, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic lines. It is a societal issue deeply rooted in our homes and institutions, which includes our schools.

Street gangs are very much a microcosm of our national diversity. The *Godfather* movies have made everyone aware of the infamous crime families that survive today. But there are also highly organized Mexican, Japanese, and Israeli "mafias." The Indo-Chinese gangs are particularly noted for extortion methods applied within their own communities; while the Haitians, Cubans, Jamaicans, and Columbian gangs are noted for their involvement with narcotics. In addition, the Chinese have their notorious "triads," with networks that stretch from Hong Kong to San Francisco to New York. Filipino gang members from affluent homes have become highly organized in some communities and are extremely well armed. White gangs in Los Angeles pattern their dress and behavior after the more visible Crips and Pirus gangs in that city. Perhaps the organization that most reflects the diversity of America's urban gangs is the Third Reich, a "hybrid" of Latino, African-American, and Jewish youth who live in the Farmer's Market area of West Los Angeles.

And it was a white "gang" that killed Yusef Hawkins in New York in the summer of 1989, inciting racial tension in a city already torn by ethnic unrest. White gangs called "skinheads" have revived racial separatism, white supremacy, and violent assaults on African-Americans, gays, and Jews across America. Ironically, there is not always a willingness by many law enforcement agencies (and therefore school officials) to classify and monitor hate groups as "street gangs," yet they fit all the criteria to be so classified. And they can be just as violent and destructive.

Moreover, members of street gangs do not always wear bandannas or chinos. Sometimes they wear three-piece suits and carry briefcases.

They represent the racial, cultural, and economic diversity that forms the fabric of American society as a whole.

The one commonality among gang members is that virtually all of them currently are, or have been, students in our schools. Thus the task facing the schools is to devise appropriate intervention strategies that can influence students in making positive decisions about their present and future life.

The integrity of these intervention strategies demands that we neither exaggerate nor underestimate the scope of the gang crisis and its potential for destroying our youth and our communities. A simple warning to "Just Say No" is not enough. Imposing a school dress code is not enough. Informing teachers about the latest fads in gang clothing and hand signals is not enough. Interventions like these are likely to result in misidentification of innocent students and offer little to help troubled youngsters. The war against street gangs can be won only when educators attack the root causes – the motivating factors and environmental conditions – that compel students to join gangs in the first place.

This fastback will examine the nature of street gangs, the reasons why students join gangs, and the key issues confronting educators when dealing with the gang phenomenon. It concludes with a blueprint for successful intervention for curtailing gang activity.

- They must distinguish themselves from other groups.
- The organization must be involved in criminal activity.

Even this definition presents some ambiguities. For example, the first four criteria are universal characteristics of organizations to which we all belong: Hopefully, the last criteria is not (however, there are some infamous S&Ls that fit all five criteria quite neatly). So what are street gangs?

Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt states, "All people have the same need for recognition, validation and acceptance from their culture and subcultures. As with gang members, so with yuppies on the career ladders of corporate America, so with faculty members aiming for tenure and departmental chairs, so with the Tlingit Indians of southeastern Alaska, giving away their worldly goods to rival clans in order to demonstrate the power and prestige of their tribe over others." In fact, take away the criminal element associated with street gangs and they might be acclaimed as powerful and natural adolescent networks providing camaraderie, a sense of purpose, socialization skills, and loyalty in the same way that civic, professional, and school-sponsored organizations do. And just as we all have a right to participate in any organization we choose, so do youth have the same right – and the same social inclination – to join together in formal and informal organizations, as long as they are not breaking the law.

Of course, we cannot realistically disregard the element of criminality associated with street gangs. In the extreme, street gangs have been responsible for tens of thousands of murders and assaults across America. In the extreme, they have fueled the drug trade; contributed mightily to the distribution of crack cocaine, methamphetamine, and other controlled substances; and rendered entire communities as literal war zones. The parallels being made here between street gangs and conventional organizations is not to justify antisocial gang behavior but rather to point out that the difficulty in defining a street gang can often lead to inappropriate responses when we embark on intervention efforts to curtail them.

What Is a Street Gang?

Most adolescents belong to some kind of group; it could be a team, a club, a neighborhood gang, or a clique. These groups usually operate under an unwritten charter characterized by a common goal or interest. The same is true of street gangs. But what makes street gangs different? Is it possible to define clearly what a street gang is?

Webster's Dictionary offers two definitions of "gang." Definition 1 is "A group of persons working together; a group of persons having informal and usually close social relations." Definition 2 is "A group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends, especially a band of antisocial adolescents." In truth, street gangs almost always fit definition 1, but not always definition 2. An individual can be a member of a street gang and never be involved in criminal activity. Clearly, then, a dictionary definition is inadequate for truly capturing the essence of what a street gang is. So let us turn to a more focused definition.

According to the California Council on Criminal Justice State Task Force, five criteria must be present before an organization is classified as a street gang by California's legal authorities:

- The organization must have a name.
- The organization must claim territory or turf.
- The members must "hang out" with each other on a continuous basis.

Continuum of Gang Involvement

Perhaps the most effective way to define street gangs is not so much by what they are but by what they do. And what they do is best understood by looking at levels of gang involvement along a continuum.

Level 1: No involvement or association with street gangs or gang members. We can only speculate on the percentage of students who fall within this level. Few police departments are able to provide demographic data on gang membership with regard to the number who are 1) juveniles, 2) enrolled in school, 3) attending school regularly, or 4) engaged in criminal activities. In order to counteract community hysteria about gang activity, it is essential that the school and community know the percentage of youth who are *not* involved in gangs. In most communities, they represent a figure from 95% to 100%!

Level 2: Admires or identifies with someone who is in a gang. Adolescents' reasons for choosing their heroes and role models are highly idiosyncratic. Typically they go through stages where they may idolize an athlete, a rock musician, a film star, a comedian, a parent, a teacher, a friend, or someone they see in their school or neighborhood. Idolization sometimes includes mimicry; and thus we see groups of adolescents who dress to look like gang members, take on the mannerisms of gang members, and want you to believe they are gang members. They may even have themselves convinced that they are gang members.

If the significant adults in their lives come to think these youngsters are indeed gang members, then several stereotypes can negatively influence these adults' perceptions of individual students, often resulting in adverse consequences. Furthermore, students who alter their appearance to look like they are a gang member run the risk of inciting a confrontation with a rival gang member, attracting the unwarranted attention of law enforcement officials, or being labeled a gang member by school officials or classmates.

Individuals who are on the outer circle of the gang structure and who mimic gang dress and mannerisms are often described as "wannabes," because ostensibly they want to be gang members. Such a

label can be damaging because it assumes the student is lost to the gang culture. A more constructive approach is to recognize that these students are at a dangerous crossroads in their life and that intervention must proceed without delay.

Level 3: Associates with gang members and sometimes participates in gang activity. This level includes those who may not have made a formal commitment to join a street gang but are, nevertheless, at a dangerous level of involvement. When a crime is committed by a gang, the law does not necessarily distinguish among those present as to whom is the guilty party. At this level youngsters can easily get in trouble regardless of whether they have been formally inducted into the gang. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing precisely how many students are involved at this level or at level 2 described above. However, it is reasonable to say that there are many students who secretly or overtly admire someone who is in a gang; there are many who identify with a street gang out of fear or fascination; and there are many who associate with and even participate with gang members but are not themselves official members of a gang.

Level 4: Classified as a documented gang member. Most law enforcement agencies use a combination of criteria to classify someone as a "documented" gang member. Among the criteria used are that the person must: 1) claim gang membership, 2) associate with other gang members on a regular basis, 3) be involved in gang-related crime, 4) display tattoos or monikers associated with a specific gang, and 5) be named by an informant as a gang member. Documenting is the method used by law enforcement agencies to identify and monitor key players in a given gang community involved in criminal activities. It also provides statistics for informing the public about how many known gang members are operating in a given city, even though it is understood that there are additional active gang members who have not yet been documented.

Some may feel that the distinctions among these four levels of involvement are of no consequence. After all, they reason, "If it looks

like a duck, sounds like a duck, and walks like a duck, it must be a duck." However, the level of involvement becomes a critical issue when it comes to intervention and corrective action. Failure to address a student's level of involvement is analogous to a doctor treating every patient in the waiting room the same, regardless of the symptoms presented.

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Why Kids Join Street Gangs

Many circumstances contribute to the decision to associate with a street gang (if it can be called a decision). It is a highly individualized matter, yet is as critical in a student's life as the decision to attend a university 3,000 miles away from home. Most students are aware of the risks involved in belonging to a street gang but also know that it offers them experiences and adventures that cannot be found anywhere else. Sometimes they join gangs as a matter of personal choice, sometimes as a result of circumstances in their immediate environment. In this chapter we examine some of the personal motivations and the environmental circumstances that influence the decision to join a gang.

Personal Factors Contributing to Gang Involvement

The numerous motivating factors influencing an individual's decision to join a street gang include power, pride, prestige, peer pressure, adventure, self-preservation, lure of money, and limited life options.

Power. There is power in affiliation with an entity that is as feared as the street gang. Gang members command respect – if for no other reason – because they are feared. Many students spend 12 years in school and never find a way to distinguish themselves or to earn the respect of their teachers or peers. Gang members in a school com-

mand the attention of everyone they come in contact with. This, then, is a form of power derived directly or indirectly from association with a street gang.

According to educator and sociologist Douglas Harrell, such power is even more potent for individuals who have been systematically disempowered. When individuals have had no real power, they will strive to out-dress, out-fight, or out-dance their peers. Such actions take on a kind of charismatic, communal power. Unlike the adult culture where the motivation is for economic or political power, in the school culture the power of gang membership quickly places students at the forefront of their peer group, thus enhancing their self-image, however transitory it might be.

Pride. Some students join gangs out of an abiding sense of pride in their neighborhood, family, religious group, or racial/ethnic group. The gang becomes a second "family," providing great camaraderie. Some gangs are territorial and fight over turf. They may be as loyal to their neighborhood as sports fans are to the hometown team.

Loyalty is a highly valued commodity, with gang members becoming oath-bound soldiers whose commitment to a cause is often measured in prison terms or spilled blood. Sometimes this fierce loyalty is manifested in fanaticism, as evidenced by white "skinhead" groups whose hate crimes become the very essence of the gang's mission.

The depth of group pride also can transcend generations. There are, for example, Latino gangs in Los Angeles that are more than 150 years old! Parents, grandparents, even great grandparents may have served in the same organizations and fought hand-to-hand with rival gangs for the honor of the same barrio.

Prestige. The United States has been described as a mosaic of various groups. These groups fall along a continuum of social prestige. And within the groups, members are ranked according to their status. Thus for most, life is a series of hurdles to overcome in order to improve one's rank and rise to a position of power and prestige. Advancing to the top requires leadership, courage, and persistence. And

often connections. This is true for both the corporate world and for the world of street gangs.

In organized street gang structures, leaders and their lieutenants emerge only as a result of tremendous personal fortitude. Even for those who are not leaders, association with a notorious gang conveys a degree of status. And this status may be accentuated by clothes or cars and access to an elite circle of peers. When you have been on America's lowest stratum, the street gang may seem to offer the most promising option for obtaining instant status and prestige.

Peer Pressure. According to a University of Michigan study, in 1950 the five factors most influencing adolescent behavior were, in descending order: home, school, church, peer group, and television. By 1980 the order of influence had changed significantly to home, peer group, television, school, and church. Jawanza Kunjufu, author of *To Be Popular or Be Smart: The Black Peer Group* (1988), suggests that today the peer group is the most powerful influence for many youth. In his view, the order of influence is: peer group, television, home, school, and church. If indeed the schools are a distant fourth behind peer group, television, and family, then they have an enormous gap to bridge if they expect to be a positive force in the lives of students.

Many youths join gangs because of peer pressure and because they are seeking the benefits of peer group association. It's far more acceptable in many adolescent circles to join a gang than it is to run for student body office. According to Kunjufu, many African-American and Hispanic youth eschew the traditional status conventions of school and refuse to participate because they do not want to be accused of "acting white." "And if being smart is acting white," asks Kunjufu rhetorically, "what is acting black?"

Adventure. Hollywood has romanticized gangsters since the earliest cowboy movies and continues to do so in prime time television, offering up chic portraits of materialism, machismo, and machine guns. Even video games depict gang members as fearsome and in-

domitable. With these powerful dual images of crime and adventure, it is not surprising that many youth would at least toy with the fantasy of leading a deadly street gang. Street gang life offers the prospects for danger and forbidden excesses, the stuff of which adolescent dreams and adventures are made.

Self-Preservation. In gang communities everyone is vulnerable. The protection the gang offers is often quite literally a matter of life and death. Whether these fears are justified or exaggerated, the need to form bonds with others to defend oneself against physical threats is as natural as it is tragic. This is perhaps the greatest irony of the street gang phenomenon.

Moreover, protection by the group confirms acceptance by the group. From these mutual bonds of support and acceptance come the distinguishing rituals of dress, language, and initiation. Individuals vow to pay the supreme price for defending the honor and integrity of the group. And sometimes the supreme price is paid. This, too, is what it means to belong.

Lure of Money. Some join street gangs because they believe the prevailing myth that they will earn huge amounts of money – hundreds, even thousands of dollars a day as a lookout or messenger for drug traffickers. This myth has some credence on one level; there are some who have benefited financially from their service to the drug trade. But on another level, there is little real financial benefit if money is simply being transferred from one hand to the other. Fast cars, fancy clothes, expensive jewelry, and powerful guns are nothing more than seductive baubles, smoky apparitions of a lifestyle too short-lived. They have succeeded only in putting a better face on their poverty. Most street gang members have no more claim to wealth than a Brink's armored car driver. Joining a street gang for the purpose of increasing economic power carries with it the ominous promise that the gang member eventually will pay with his life or his freedom.

Limited Life Options. Many youngsters drift into gang activity because of the lack of viable alternatives. When students have choices,

they are more likely to take advantage of opportunities and develop the skills necessary to become productive and contributing members at school and in the larger society. But if viable options are not available or if students are not aware of them, then their life options are limited. In other words, you cannot choose if you have no choices. If schools, churches, and communities offer few choices, then gang membership may appear to be the best available option.

Each of the motivating forces listed above can be satisfied to some degree through conventional, socially acceptable forms of involvement in school and community activities. In fact, the overwhelming majority of school-aged youth do function adequately through such conventional forms of involvement. However, youth who are most at risk for joining gangs tend to be influenced by another set of dynamics related to their societal circumstances. So let us now consider some of these societal factors that may contribute to the gang phenomenon.

Societal Factors Contributing to Gang Involvement

Despite the promise of the American dream of equality for all, we remain a nation of "haves" and "have-nots." As a nation we are experiencing a growing "underclass" characterized by illiteracy, unemployment, chronic poverty, homelessness, and despair. These conditions are partly the result of persistent racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. They are the seeds from which antisocial behavior springs.

Yes, we can point to many who have defied the odds, persevered, and succeeded in spite of all the obstacles laid before them. It is consoling to cite these individual success stories; but we delude ourselves if we think racism, classism, and discrimination have disappeared. Might these factors have something to do with the formation of street gangs?

The point has been made that street gangs are a transcultural phenomenon, but it cannot be denied that they are more prevalent

in impoverished communities and urban ghettos and that the residents of these ghettos are seldom white. While it would be an oversimplification to cite poverty and racism as the direct causes of street gangs, they are closely associated with other factors contributing to the formation of street gangs, namely, alienation, exclusion, and disenfranchisement.

It might be argued that we all experience some degree of alienation and exclusion, but there are safety nets built into our institutions (family, school, church, community and social groups) that allow most of us to prevail. However, when these same institutions alienate and exclude young people, the result is likely to be dysfunctional individuals at risk of succumbing to the siren call of street gangs.

Alvin: A Profile of a Gang Member

Keeping in mind the personal and societal factors contributing to gang involvement discussed above, let us look at a hypothetical profile of a gang member. While there is no typical profile of a gang member, no group is more at risk than the African-American male adolescent. Not since the near annihilation of Native Americans at the close of the 19th century has any racial or ethnic group of Americans been more endangered. According to Dr. Louis Sullivan, Secretary of Health and Human Services, African-American males have lost a full half-year of life expectancy in the four years from 1987-1990. Consider these disturbing statistics:

- African-American males are eight times more likely to go to prison than white males.
- The number of deaths among African-American males aged 15-24 increased by 66% between 1983-88.
- Between 1977 and 1987, more than 20,000 African-American males became homicide victims.
- The infant mortality rate for African-American babies is nearly double that of white babies.

Against these statistics, let us look at Alvin, a 16-year-old African-American youth from an impoverished neighborhood in Los Angeles. Here is how Alvin might be affected by the most influential institutions in his world: school, church, family, community, and social group.

Alvin attends a school where there is a "gang problem." School officials have imposed a dress code but otherwise seem to be ignoring the subversive activity taking place on campus. Some of Alvin's friends regard this as an endorsement for the gangs. Others think the teachers are too intimidated or naive to do anything about them.

Alvin is exposed to a curriculum that mostly ignores the accomplishments and contributions of African-Americans and people of color in general. Further, most of his teachers fail to maintain high expectations for his academic success. They have little awareness of his needs or interests. Alvin's teachers gave up on him a long time ago, but not the football coach. He keeps trying to convince Alvin that he has a future in the game, even though less than 1% of all college football players ever make it to the NFL; and those that do have careers that average less than three years.

Alvin has never joined a school club, does not play a musical instrument, and is reading on the sixth-grade level. When he gets arrested and the local newspaper runs his picture and name, most of the faculty and most of his classmates will actually become aware of Alvin for the first time.

There can be no denying that dysfunctional families dramatically increase the likelihood of dysfunctional family members. By chance, Alvin is a victim of the odds. He comes from a single-parent home, headed by a loving mother who works hard just to get by. His mom can afford very little quality time with her son; and at 16, Alvin requires and desires less of her affection.

There are men to serve as positive role models in Alvin's immediate community, but they are seldom visible. Economic realities require them to commute to their jobs, where many enjoy successful careers.

Many successful African-American men also live in the suburbs and never come into contact with Alvin at all. The men he sees most, the men he talks to most, are unemployed. They hang out behind the liquor store. They drink, gamble, and swap stories about the Super Bowl. They are there every day.

Since the implementation of Proposition 13 and the Gann initiatives in California, significant cutbacks to social programs have all but closed park and recreation facilities, youth organizations, and summer work programs. Alvin has been going to the park to watch the men play basketball since he was a little boy. He saw his first (but not his last) murder there. He was introduced to the drug trade there. It's the hub for all kinds of illegal activity, but there is nowhere else to go.

The media are no help. Alvin spends several hours a day watching television sit-coms, which either accentuate old stereotypes or create new ones. Alvin cannot relate to the Cosby family. Occasionally he sees African-American journalists, who always seem to have beats called "minority affairs." Most of the African-Americans he sees on the news, if he watches the news at all, are those who have been shot, arrested, or victimized. He rarely hears about the accomplishments of successful African-Americans, unless they are athletes or entertainers.

Of course, there is more ethnic diversity represented in advertising. Corporate America is eager for dollars from all ethnic groups, so they pay millionaire NBA basketball players to hype their $125 tennis shoes. And kids in the inner city will virtually kill one another in order to obtain this ultimate adolescent status symbol.

The community church in Alvin's neighborhood attempts to counteract the negative influences in the community. Reverend Thompson is a strong community activist who commands at least the passive respect of the innumerable factions and warring gangs. He leads community marches on Saturday mornings imploring gangs to stop the violence. He organizes holiday dinners to feed the homeless. He

preaches hard against the evils of the drug trade. He is a missionary, and the streets are often his pulpit. And he cares deeply about Alvin. For 16 years, he has been the most influential African-American male in Alvin's life; but there is only one of him. As Alvin gets older, he attends church less and less. Over time Reverend Thompson's influence has waned.

Alvin finds consistency and camaraderie in his peer group. The kids in his apartment complex have grown up together. They used to mimic the neighborhood adults, pretending they were gambling or fighting. Now they don't pretend anymore. They are approaching manhood. They are big, strong boys who are far too calloused and streetwise to be afraid.

Alvin's immediate group of friends have more influence over him than anybody else. They could just as easily aspire to go to college together or join the army together. But instead, they establish a compact, adopt a name, and begin to weave strong bonds based on dress and mannerisms that are unique to their own peer group. And another street gang is formed.

Alvin has learned what ethnic immigrant groups in America have known for generations: that there is indeed strength in numbers and that the group offers rewards that could not be obtained independently. Opportunities, then, must be created and seized. If money is the vehicle to power and comfort, then Alvin will make whatever sacrifice is necessary to obtain it, even if it costs him his freedom or his life.

In Alvin's tiny, tragic corner of the world, there are too few opportunities and too few dreams. IBM does not recruit in his neighborhood. Nor does USC. The world at large passes by and pays little attention at all. In suburbia it is easy to ignore the endless cycle of tragic events taking place in America's poorest neighborhoods. In suburbia it is easy to blame the victim.

This profile of Alvin is a composite of many adolescents who slip into the gang culture. But there are, of course, many youths who grow

up in environments just like Alvin's and never get involved in gangs. They provide the success stories whose lives and experiences yield additional clues for educators who wish to develop an effective intervention strategy.

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Unproductive Approaches for Curtailing Gang Activity

On a recent visit to a school, the vice principal informed me that he was experiencing the worst week in his career as an administrator. The problem, he said, was street gangs. No, it wasn't graffiti or violence or drive-by shootings that had caused the disarray on his campus. It was his faculty's response to a gang awareness workshop that had been offered only two days before.

During the workshop, officers from the local police department's gang detail came to share their expertise about gangs with the staff. They pulled no punches; their presentation was both compelling and shocking. They told the staff that in order to protect their students and themselves, they must be able to identify the tell-tale signs of street gangs. This meant learning the gang culture of clothing, hand signals, graffiti, jargon, and methods of operation.

As it turned out, the police gang detail had given the staff just enough information to be dangerous. The staff took what little clues they were given about gang culture, combined it with their own stereotypes about who joins gangs, and proceeded to refer every suspected "gang member" in their classrooms to the vice principal. Virtually every child referred during these two crazy days was either African-American or Hispanic. And virtually every child referred was innocent of violating any school or penal codes. In truth, there was not a legitimate gang member in the group.

There is a lesson here. Children who have been falsely accused (perhaps not for the first time) of being gang members will feel more and more alienated from the adults who are supposed to be there to teach and protect them. And this alienation only contributes to the cycle of failure. Moreover, once accused, there is the danger that their classmates will begin to think of them as gang members. Or the accused themselves might decide that if you are going to be labeled as a gang member, you might as well act like one.

This staff's response is not an uncommon occurrence. It happens often when an attempt is made to heighten awareness without providing sufficient information or without providing a context for assimilating the information. Unfortunately, too many schools attempt to address their perceived gang problem using a kind of "search and destroy" technique. They attempt to identify the kids who are in gangs, scrutinize their every move, and remove them from school on the slightest provocation.

Such a strategy is dangerous and ineffective. First, there is no reliable way of identifying gang members. As pointed out earlier, there are at least four levels of gang involvement ranging from no involvement at all to a documented gang member. Even if a student tells you he is in a gang, it does not necessarily mean he is. After all, assuming a false persona has long been a favorite pastime of youth. Furthermore, as a youth subculture, gangs are in a constant state of transition. By the time authorities have cracked their unwritten codes, they have already adopted new styles and conventions. Gang identification based on these transitory characteristics is as unreliable as weather forecasting.

School officials often feel that the only way to control gang activity is to identify suspected gang members, take a tough posture, and hold the line. When property is damaged, students are assaulted, or drugs are being sold, the officials assume they will have a working pool of suspects from which to draw the guilty parties. Furthermore, by maintaining a list of suspected gang members, school officials can reassure the community that they are on top of the crisis. But are they?

Identifying gang members in school is fraught with difficulties, as pointed out above. Misidentifying and labeling students leads to alienation, lowered self-esteem, and lowered teacher expectations – conditions that can actually precipitate gang activity.

Suppose you are a high school math teacher meeting a new class on the first day of school. As you survey the students seated in your class, you note that that there are three who are reputed to be gang members. Now ask yourself:

Would you call on them if they never raised their hands?
Would you blame them if a wallet turned up missing one day?
Would you tolerate their minor disruptions in order to avoid a confrontation?
Would you force a confrontation so you could get rid of them?
Would you praise them for good work they did?
Would you challenge them intellectually every day?
Would you hold them to the same expectations you have for others?
Do you really believe that they can succeed?

Would your answers reflect your preconceived attitudes and stereotyped notions about gangs? Or would they reflect your professional obligation to value all students and expect the best of them, without in any way endorsing their gang membership?

The solution to controlling street gang activity in schools is not "search and destroy" tactics. This is not to say that educators can ignore the presence of gang activity. When acts of violence and intimidation occur, they must be dealt with without delay. But lasting solutions call for intervention strategies that stress conversion and not suppression, strategies that address the causes of gang activity and not the symptoms.

Another common response by school officials to the suspected presence of gangs is the blanket banning of specific clothes, colors, jewelry, hand signals, and other paraphernalia associated with local gang culture. Such decrees typically have only a band-aid effect and tend

to force gang activity "underground." Take away the bandannas, hats, and scripted jackets on Friday, and students will return on Monday with tattoos, pierced ears, or some other distinguishing mark of gang identity. Furthermore, if students, who are already disenfranchised, are denied the right to expression through their dress, then it will only exacerbate their sense of alienation from school. On the other hand, there is justification for a dress code at times in order to protect students. Many students have become victims of gang violence as a result of flashing the wrong hand signals or wearing the wrong colors in the wrong part of town.

The conflict here between the right of expression and policies that serve to protect students may ultimately be resolved through the spirit in which such policies are conceived and implemented. Dress codes imposed in isolation, with no effort to intervene in any other constructive way, will do little to curtail gang activity.

Still another unproductive tactic used by law enforcement agencies for curtailing gang activity is what is called the gang sweep. These are used primarily in urban areas where gang activity is most prevalent. Gang sweeps conducted in Los Angeles in the weeks following the accidental shooting of a Japanese tourist in Westwood resulted in the arrest of more than 1,000 suspected gang members. Yet gang activity is still pervasive in Los Angeles. In fact, in 1987 when "Operation Streetsweep" was implemented, gang-related killings actually increased by 25%! In other cities entire gang factions have been arrested and incarcerated; yet the void is quickly filled, and the violence continues.

What compels a youth to persist as a street gang member when the consequences are so dangerous? The reason is simply that too many of our institutions miss the target; they treat the symptom and not the disease. As Walter Goldschmidt points out, declaring war on gangs inevitably provokes an adversarial stance striking right to the core of street gang ideology: loyalty, machismo, and revenge. Street gangs are not the malady; they are only one more symptom of a much deeper

systemic crisis in our society, which also contributes to dropout rates, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, truancy, vandalism, and suicide.

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An Educational Approach to Curtailing Street Gangs

What most Americans (including educators) know about street gangs is limited to what they have read in the newspaper or watched on the evening news. Media images consistently portray gang members dealing drugs on street corners or sitting handcuffed in the back of patrol cars. We see lines of young men (usually African-American or Hispanic) lined up and spread-eagled along the side of a liquor store, being frisked for weapons and drugs or lying face down in the street with a knee and a rifle barrel pressed to the back of their head.

The camera doesn't lie; there are thousand of African-American and Hispanic gang members in American cities. However, most men in these ethnic groups do work or go to school or volunteer in their communities. Unfortunately, images of these men do not make for compelling television viewing. Thus the media images reinforce a negative racial stereotype that perpetuates hysteria and xenophobia.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most educators view the phenomenon of street gangs as a problem for law enforcement agencies to resolve. And when the problem spills over into the schools, educators' response often is to let the police come in and "fix" it. After all, the police are on the front lines; they see street violence firsthand and sometimes are themselves the victims of that violence.

The law enforcement objective is to *fight* gangs by apprehending criminal offenders and incarcerating them. Educators, on the other hand, should be in the business of *preventing* gangs. To do this, they

must address the root causes of why youth join gangs. It is time that we begin to address the gang problem from an educational perspective. Only in this way can youth be retrieved from the streets and directed toward productive lives in the community. Thus, the first step in dealing with street gangs in schools is for educators to recognize that the gang problem is not the exclusive domain of sociologists, criminologists, and law enforcement officials. The next step is to take stock of enormous resources and expertise that educators can bring to an intervention process. Consider the following:

- Educators spend an average of 6½ hours a day with children, 184 days a year over 12 years.
- Educators are experts in adolescent behavior, growth, and development and youth culture.
- Educators are experts in developing programs that address socio-educational issues and problems. These include programs for dropout prevention, student advocacy, peer counseling, leadership training, parent involvement, and alternative teaching methods, among others.
- Schools already have in place many curricula that address the needs of youth in such areas as vocational education, business education, career planning, goal setting, self-esteem development, problem solving, effective communication, race relations, civic literacy, and values education. All of these have the potential for mitigating the conditions that lead to gang involvement.
- Perhaps the most important asset of educators is that they have the potential for being the most powerful advocates that youth have in the community.

To date, there is little evidence that this combination of resources and expertise has been exploited to address the gang problem. Staff development efforts have been limited primarily to awareness-level activities that provide information about gang culture and identification of gang members. Clearly, this is inadequate for the task at hand.

We can let law enforcement agencies take criminals off the streets, but it is up to educators to develop the intervention strategies that keep youth from ever considering gang involvement as a viable option. This requires a long-term commitment that goes beyond mere awareness training. There are no quick fixes for a problem of this magnitude.

A Blueprint for Gang Intervention

So what can we do about street gangs in our schools? Some would argue that the lure of money, the power of peer pressure, and the fascination of gang culture present insurmountable odds; thus the gang crisis is beyond the capability of the schools to control. A more powerful argument is that the schools get to children long before the "street" does. And with this head start they have the opportunity to foster academic and personal success, thus preparing youngsters for productive citizenship.

What follows is a blueprint for an intensive intervention program that deals with the gang problem. The blueprint has five components: staff development, values education, school climate, cultural inclusion, and community involvement. Each is discussed below.

Staff Development

A staff-development program might begin with sessions on who joins gangs, what gang members do, and why street gangs exist. With this information in hand, staff must then ask themselves whether they can intervene in ways to help youngsters overcome a cycle of failure. This is no easy task. It demands a commitment to:

- rid schools of the conditions that contribute to gang behavior;
- respect each student as an individual;
- ensure the safety and well-being of all students;
- protect the fundamental rights of all students;

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- promote a sense of self-worth and cultural pride;
- teach students the value of cultural pluralism;
- provide legitimate and realistic life options to students.

A staff-development program also should examine the sociological aspects of gang participation, the dynamics of racism, and the role of media in perpetuating gang myths. However, effective staff development does not focus solely on content.

In schools with gang problems, there usually are festering conditions that contribute to the problem. Rooting out those conditions requires an honest self-assessment by the staff to see if the school's climate, curriculum, special programs, and teaching methods are contributing to the problem. By analyzing each of these elements, a staff can decide what changes are needed to ensure the academic and social success of all students. Beyond analysis of these elements, a staff-development program must include intensive training opportunities that give teachers the skills to serve diverse student populations effectively.

Values Education

In the context of gang intervention strategies, values education is a vital component. Gang behavior reflects value decisions that are frightening in their portents: they kill one another in drive-by shootings; they participate in drug trafficking or prostitution; they jeopardize their personal safety out of loyalty to their gang; they drop out of school. These decisions may be influenced more by peer pressure and television than by family or school; but they are value decisions, nevertheless.

Many educators and parents question whether the schools should be teaching values. They express concern about whose values will be taught. They worry that such controversial issues as abortion or homosexuality will be presented in a biased manner, with "bias" being defined as viewpoints with which one does not agree. But in the gang intervention context, teaching values focuses on such issues as the

relative importance of money and material possessions, loyalty, respect for the law, civic responsibility, the work ethic, and respect for life and property. Few would find these controversial.

Models of effective values education programs exist across the nation. In inner-city Chicago, Dumas Elementary School uses the "Character Education Program." Lansing Middle School in New York has implemented the "Quest" program to instill social skills that help students make appropriate choices and judgments. At Culver Military Academy in Indiana the Honor Code and strong discipline are the foundation of school life. The "Success Program" at the California Juvenile Rehabilitation Facility in Campo teaches personal responsibility and methods for controlling impulsive behavior. Northport High School in New York emphasizes fairness and an understanding of the justice system in its "Law-Related Education" program. These, and many other programs like them, are guided by a set of simple objectives: 1) to teach the difference between right and wrong, 2) to teach responsibility for one's own actions, and 3) to empower all students with the skills to make the right decisions.

Some of the skills needed to make the right decisions in today's world include the ability to think critically and creatively, to communicate across cultures, to work collaboratively in a group, to solve problems, and to manage enormous amounts of information. It may not be readily evident as to how these skills relate to a gang intervention strategy. However, it becomes evident when you see students who have been caught up in a cycle of failure become empowered with a new sense of confidence as they use these skills in their school and personal lives.

These skills, when coupled with a solid foundation in basic academic skills, can transform dysfunctional students into achieving students. A prime example is the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, located in the heart of East Harlem. This school once had one of the highest dropout rates in the nation; but as a direct result of its academic transformation, it is attracting and holding students

from throughout the city. The school now proudly boasts that all of its students graduate and every graduate goes on to college.

School Climate

School climate is a critical element in a gang intervention strategy. Students must feel welcome and wanted every day they come to school. School personnel must genuinely care about the students they serve if they expect to intervene positively in their lives.

Students deserve a safe, clean, and orderly school environment. Resourceful administrators, parents, and businesses have collaborated in many districts to provide labor and materials necessary for building repairs and upkeep.

Gang graffiti detracts from a healthy school climate. In some communities school officials have fought the graffiti battle by having students or local artists paint attractive murals on spaces that had previously been prime targets for graffiti. Others, like George McKenna, superintendent of Inglewood Public Schools, simply outpainted the vandals. He reports, "I got rid of the graffiti through persistence. They would paint, we would paint, they paint, we paint, they paint, we paint. Eventually they run out of paint. I will never run out of paint."

Cultural Inclusion

Recently, many school districts have begun to create a more "culturally inclusive" curriculum, one that expands the traditional Eurocentric, Western culture emphasis to include the contributions and accomplishments that all racial and ethnic groups have made to America.

Until our African-American, Native-American, Hispanic, and Asian children see the abundant contributions of their forebears represented in the history and literature texts they read, they have little basis for pride in their national heritage. Moreover, if white children are not aware of the contributions of racial and ethnic groups other than their

own, they cannot be expected to value ethnic diversity within their own community and the nation.

Multiethnic schools must celebrate their diversity – and not just during Black History Month or at an annual ethnic food fair. All racial and ethnic groups should be represented in every curricular and extracurricular program from the yearbook to the student council, from athletes to cheerleaders. Bulletin boards, awards ceremonies, and all special events should reflect the school's diversity. To ensure that all aspects of school life are culturally inclusive will require strong advocacy from the staff.

Community Involvement

Many communities are now involved in various kinds of school-business consortia to address the issue of street gangs. These consortia tap into the community's most influential citizens and invite them all to the table: corporate leaders, business owners, college professors, law enforcement officials, religious leaders, school officials, parents and, of course, kids themselves. One such consortium in Tacoma, Washington, is called the Safe Streets Campaign. Early reports indicate that its efforts have stemmed the escalation of crime and violence and improved living conditions in some areas of the city.

School districts throughout the nation are inviting positive male role models into the classroom. Programs have been implemented in Baltimore, Detroit, Miami, Milwaukee, San Diego, and Washington that recruit successful men, often African-American and Hispanic professionals, to discuss what it takes to succeed in life. Some of them make a long-term commitment to work with students on a regular basis. The role model program is another way of bringing the community into the intervention process.

Local industries and businesses often are willing to contribute resources to help youth. They do, after all, have a vested interest in seeing that youth succeed, since they represent the future workforce. The kinds of resources provided include mentors, career advisors,

role models, equipment and materials, and apprentice or work-study programs.

Colleges and universities also have a role to play in the intervention process through closer collaboration with elementary and secondary schools. By providing academic counseling and financial aid information, higher education institutions can help youth realize that going to college is a viable option.

Law enforcement agencies in many cities have their own intervention strategies. Some have programs that give students specific methods for resisting pressures to join a gang or to become involved in drug trafficking.

Parents, of course, are vital partners in the intervention process. The Pomona (California) Police Department has been sponsoring "truce" meetings involving parents of gang members and clergy. By becoming much more aware of their children's activities, parents are in a better position to monitor and influence their behavior. Parents of youth in rival gangs keep in touch with one another, even call each other when they know trouble is imminent.

A group called Concerned Parents was founded in East Los Angeles more than 15 years ago and has now branched out to other communities in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Other parent groups, such as MAGIC (Mothers Against Gangs in Our Community) in Los Angeles, have become influential voices in the community and need to be a part of a school's intervention program.

Every community has many resources to draw on when developing a comprehensive gang intervention strategy. They simply need to be sought out and invited to help.

A complex set of social, cultural, and economic factors account for the existence of street gangs. There is no simple solution for eradicating them. Those who lament that the schools are already stretched to the limit and cannot solve all of society's ills should ask themselves whether they can continue to teach the basic subjects and ignore the outside influences on children. Something happens between

the time children enter first grade and when they reach ninth grade that causes them to choose the path to street gang activity. Some of those causes can be found in the school's environment. Are the schools to be part of the problem or can they be part of the solution? Educators have the opportunity, training, and resources to confront the gang crisis head on. It is not a question of ability. It is a question of will.

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Conclusion

In this fastback I have argued that schools cannot approach the gang problem with the same strategies that law enforcement agencies use, that is, identification of suspected gang members. Instead, educators must first place the gang crisis in proper perspective by distinguishing the myths and facts about gang culture, by examining the root causes for the gang phenomenon, by intervening rather than labeling or blaming. They must believe that all children can and will succeed. And they must create a nurturing environment for all students, where success in school – and life – becomes the only attractive option.

Martin Luther King Jr. said in another time and in another context that:

> When an individual is no longer a true participant, when he no longer feels a sense of responsibility to his society, the content of democracy is emptied. When culture is degraded and vulgarity enthroned, when the social system does not build security but induces peril, inexorably the individual is impelled to pull away from a soul-less society. This process produces alienation – perhaps the most pervasive and insidious development in contemporary society.

Let us not pretend that the only street gang victims are those who have been wounded, murdered, arrested, or assaulted. Entire schools have become victims, even if only victims of their own paralysis. You can see their shells in urban neighborhoods. You can feel the pres-

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ence of the children they refused to serve and those they served improperly.

Gang intervention is war, not a war against the gangs themselves but against the forces and conditions that steal our youth away. It is a war that must be waged for the children until we win them all back, one at a time if necessary.

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